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Charles William Sherborn

An Appreciation

by William Fowler Hopson

Together with a Tribute to Mr. Sherborn in Verse

by Sheldon Cheney

With a Portrait and Two Plates



BERKELEY

At the Sign of the Berkeley Oak

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Charles William Sherborn, R. E.

An Appreciation by W. F. Hopson



THERE is often a strong feeling of hesitation in venturing to approach the "Master" who stands at the head of one's own profession, supreme as to service and accomplishment—the master who has long been looked up to, from a distance, with respect for his character and admiration for his achievements—and even though the meeting has been looked forward to with the keenest anticipations, and hopeful assurances of a kindly welcome, yet as the time draws near such a sense of diffidence possesses one as to cause the final effort to seem beyond the power of the will to compass. One moment one is eager to go, the next depressed by all sorts of reasons why it were best not to do so. Quite a little of this feeling took possession of me, towards the subject of this sketch, when at last, after long years of waiting, I found myself speeding away from Tilbury docks on to London Town. Possibly some of this nervousness was due, and coupled with, a certain dread of the great City itself. In my imagination it had always seemed so big, so overpowering, such an unwieldy monster, that I fully expected to feel as strange and helpless as a crofter there. I smile now at all such childish fears. Dear Old London ! So full of interest, so hospitable, so entertaining, so restful even in spite of her teeming millions; the home of everything that counts, the Mecca of many of my most cherished day-dreams as man and boy.

I did not indeed go and stand in the street where the good man lived, like the bashful lover in the story, and turn away without knocking at the door, but I

did worse—I ran out to Salisbury and stayed a month. I visited Bath and Bristol, with other places in the West, for another month. But the loadstone of desire was strong and soon took me back to the City, helped somewhat, I must confess, by a letter or two of kindly remonstrance received in the meantime.

Much has been said and written of English reserve, but when once esteem and confidence have been established, so that both parties may meet upon a common ground of respect, no people are more kindly, more hospitable, more demonstrative or more self-sacrificing in their friendships. This was my experience in more than a few instances during my year of vacation in Great Britain.

Having knocked at the door of the house at No. 1 Finborough Road, as well as rung the bell (for at most places in that favored land you are requested on a neat little sign to do both) and been admitted, I soon found myself upon the most delightful footing of friendship, whence followed a winter of complete enjoyment, inspiration and education. The many hours spent in that pleasant studio at the top of the house, together with the no less happy ones passed with the family lower down, will be held fast in remembrance so long as memory serves. Such an assembly of prints as any collector might take pride in possessing, hung upon the walls or filled to overflowing fat and bulging portfolios. These were spread before my delighted eyes day after day, their beauties admired and discussed, as we sat by the sputtering and dancing fire, before a truly John Leech, Christmas Carol little coal-grate, with good cheer ever at hand simmering upon the hob, while wit, kindly gossip and keen analysis of men and prints, fell from the master's lips. And whether the sun shone upon the thousands of funny roofs and funnier chimney pots in sight, or the fogs of London closed in and softened or effaced their fantastic outlines, I neither knew nor cared.

Durer and Rembrandt, Aldegrever, the Behams, Van Leyden and Bewick, with others of the "Little Masters," passed in review, not to mention many moderns down to Linton, Whistler and Sir Seymour

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Haden. It is easy to discern where Sherborn, this latter-day king of the graver, has gone for inspiration and example. There is a certain strength and sweetness about the work of the early German engravers in line, seldom seen in modern practice, qualities inherent in the early flowings of the streams of human effort, as there are in nature's rivers, which rarely pertain to later and deeper floods. The "Little Masters" specially are rich in feeling and true in technique; they did more, by their example, to mould the destinies of engraving to great and noble ends than any other one set of men. Craftsmen, for the most part, are but creatures of circumstance, products of their own particular time and country. The exception is the occasional man, who (despite the tendencies and exactions of his own clime and age, when that age has passed beyond the maturity of its powers), having the strength and foresight, insists upon his own individuality, dominates his environment, chooses the influences which mould his career, and by force of character creates his own circumstances. Such a man, and such a man only, will impress his personality and practice upon his own and succeeding generations.

Charles William Sherborn was born June 14, 1831, at 43 Leicester Square, London. The foundation for his education was obtained, as was that of most English boys of the time, at a local diocesan school, though he studied for a while at Cave House, near Uxbridge. But the real education of the man came as has that of so many of the world's great workers, from keen personal observation, constant study, and close contact with other men, and those of the best. The following facts, concerning the years of his wanderjahre, are taken from the Book of the Sherborns compiled by his son Charles Davies Sherborn. "Leaving school at the age of 14, he attended the Government School of Drawing and Design at Sommerset House, and was afterwards apprenticed to an engraver in London. In 1851 he went to Paris, where he studied art for nearly twelve months, living in the Students' Quarter as an artisan. From there he went to Rome, where he had the good fortune to study under Pietro Girometti, the medallist and cameo worker, and enjoyed the friendship of John Gibson,

the sculptor. After leaving Rome he visited Naples, Pisa, Florence, and other Italian cities, made a tour through Tuscany, and returning through Switzerland, settled in Geneva for two years. Here he pursued his craft of designer and gold-worker, and obtained a general knowledge of watch and clock manufacture. He became a member of the Artist's Club and of the Swiss Gymnastic Society of Geneva. Returning to London in 1856, he continued his work till 1872, when misfortune in business gave him his opportunity of showing his true powers as an etcher and engraver in pure line. During the time spent as a craftsman Charles William was an indefatigable student, working at the night schools at South Kensington and the classes at the Royal Academy. His earliest exhibited work at the Royal Academy was in 1862-3, and since that date he has been fairly constantly represented. On the foundation of the Society of Painter-Etchers in 1884 he was chosen one of the original members, and one of the finest of his works is the line-engraved portrait of his friend, the President of the Society, Sir Seymour Haden."

The art of engraving in all its branches is subject to the same tendency as every other form of the expression of man's restless industry, namely that of rise and fall, birth and decay; being born in strength it dies in weakness, and that not once or twice in the history of the art, but over and over again many times.

C. W. Sherborn entered the ranks of metal engravers for printing purposes (circa 1860) at a time when the art was well nigh at its lowest ebb, being given over to the universal practice of machine-ruled skies and every other abomination for furthering the commercial demands for quick, and consequently cheap, reproduction of light and shade, seemingly without regard for, or knowledge of, beauty of line. It is not tone, light and shade and perfect gradation of color, that makes an engraving noble and worthy of all admiration, but it is fitness and beauty of line, and above all, in the final summing up, it is the richness of each individual line, taken in connection with all the other lines in the picture, which union of lines has the supreme quality

of impressing the beholder with a sense of atmospheric suggestion, and with the feeling also that there was the utmost freedom in execution, for without full freedom in the cutting there can be no suggestion of atmosphere in the resultant printing.

As in 1452 the niello cutters of Italy had but little to learn in regard to the skilful use of the graver, when they finally turned their attention to the production of copper plates for printing purposes, so our artist, when he entered this, to him, new field of artistic endeavors, found himself already well equipped in the use of his instrument for expression. And while there has been, as was to be expected as time rolled on, a steady increase in power over the graver, a subtler touch, a surer and more delicate hand in the rendering of forms and shades, yet the evidence of the finest artistic feeling is not lacking in those plates done in earlier years. Whether consciously or not, the engraver by ignoring the prevailing practice of his own day and generation, and yielding to the wholesome influences of the earlier workers, merits no less than they the honorable title of "Little Master," not because his works are small as measured in inches, but because he has kept the faith and labored in that simple and direct style of truth to nature and first regard for beauty of technique. Full worthily does he wear the robe dropped from their shoulders and they would have been proud to welcome him as a kindred spirit into their guild.

Mention has been made of the portrait of Sir Seymour Haden. It is a superb piece of designing and engraving, worthy to rank with the best of any school, rich in tone, true in choice of line, combining as do most of his works, the right degree of strength and delicacy, not spoiled by over-refinement, but satisfying in us that sense which recognizes, craves and demands the beautiful. And while on the subject of portraits it may be well to say that the artist considers that this is the department in which he could have surpassed all his other efforts. And he feels, feels strongly, and justly too, that he should have been encouraged with commissions to work much more largely in this field. The heads he has engraved will cause coming lovers of the limner's art to regret

the short-sightedness of present-day patrons, and the future will be well within its bounds if it upbraids us for our neglect in this respect.

His portrait of Shakespeare, from his own design, is but another evidence in favor of the word spoken above. It is bright, clear, dignified, noble in conception and execution, worthy of the poet, as few of his engraved presentments have been.

Were I a modern Croesus, and thus able to afford a 1623 folio, I would place these two together, and cry, "Alpha and Omega, the first and the last; and the first has come by it's own". If this should seem extravagant praise, all I can say is, just examine a fine proof from this plate and say if I am not justified in this estimate.

His original portrait of John Phelps, the Putney waterman, is a remarkable piece of drawing and engraving. It has nothing in common with the practice of our time. It is unique to a degree. It shines and sparkles like a rare old piece of silver in the sun. It is the "golden age" of engraving born anew. Had Sherborn never done anything else than this one head it would carry his name down in glory as long as ink and paper last.

His Apollo, as well as the figures on his own personal book-plate, show how successful the artist has been in rendering the nude with dignity, chastity and beauty. If fortunate enough to possess, or see, a copy of either of these rare plates, look at it closely with reference to the one quality of beauty of line.

Many other plates will answer as well—the Lord Battersea, the Burlington Club, the Samuel S. Joseph or the Thomas T. Greg, to mention only a few, but those of the best. This supreme quality of beauty of line, sweet line, atmospheric line, is conspicuous in all of these plates and many others. I make much of this point, because it is the very highest quality in all engraving; without this, no engraving however perfect in other respects can be considered great and noble. The gift of beauty of line is wholly a matter of feeling, for it can neither be taught nor acquired. It is a royal endowment out of the great unknown, some nervous





Robert Day J.P. F.S.A. M.R.I.A. & P.R.S.A.
 High Sheriff of Cork 1893. President of
 the Cork Archaeological Soc. 1902.

connection between the brain and hand of the artist. I know of no metal engraver of ancient or modern practice who has surpassed our friend in this respect. Strange as it may appear, few engravers on metal have possessed this highest quality in any great degree, while many wood engravers have, and more etchers have been so gifted than either. The engraver himself does not consider this, nor would it avail him if he did. His mind is occupied with other things—form, color and composition—necessary adjuncts, but all to be attained to by thought and labor. Not so this other. “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature.” Neither can he in this other respect, but, endowed at birth with this God-given gift of feeling for beauty of line, our artist shall not lack in other directions, but be counted as kindred with those who, standing alone, loom up in bold relief above their fellows, landmarks in the art of engraving for all time, like Aldegrevier, Rembrandt, Edelinck, Bewick and Linton.

“He that hath eyes to see, let him see.”

(Thanks are due to Mr. Sherborn for his kindness in overseeing the printing of the two illustrations from his original coppers, and to Mr. Robert Day for permission to use his plate in this form. The portrait of Mr. Sherborn was taken in his studio by Mr. Hopson, in September of this year.)



To Charles William Sherborn

Thus, in the jewelled East, skilled craftsmen old
Thread opals, smoldering fires, on chains of gold
To pendants of surpassing loveliness
That rival the white throats which they caress.
Thus slender hands in flower-strewn Japan,
In memory of some dream of bathing girl
Glimpsed on the flashing sands, from lustrous pearl
Fashion a white-limbed Venus, fairer than
The slim and faultless model.

But, Master! Through the labyrinthine ways
Of beauty's world I wandered wistful days,
Nor knew the wonder of the graven line
So wrought with love and pain, till I saw thine.
For in it glows the opal's fire, and glint
Of ivory limbs, love-wrought in jewelled print.
For only Durer's burin has yet caught
Such brilliants in the mesh of line, and wrought
In such deep, subtle meanings.

Yea, these long-treasured little prints of thine
Had not been stored with all life's pretty things—
Dew-moistened flowers; the purple patterned wings
Of butterflies; and sweet pale women more divine
Than mortal; simple truth; and the clear flame
Of perfect beauty lighting all—except
That thou hadst had a poet's heart, and wept
With music. Poet-graver, know thy name
Deathless till beauty dies.

Sheldon Cheney.

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C.W. Sherborn

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